

SERMON FOR THE 21ST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 5 October 2008)

Text: ¹ Do we need like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. ⁴ Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. ⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 3:1-6)

As a pastor of a church it is not easy for me to preach on this particular passage. The reason is that it is all about the office of the ministry. In other words, I need to preach about the office which I hold within the church. Personally I may resist to preach about this, but then again it may be something that really needs to be heard from time to time.

The backdrop to this sermon text is one of tension and dispute. Of all the congregations that the apostle Paul founded and served the congregation in Corinth was without doubt his most difficult one. The congregation was marked by cliques. And because of the internal infighting there were a number of problems and areas of disagreement. In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle responds to some of these problems - questions about sex and marriage, lawsuits against fellow believers, the elevation of certain spiritual gifts, the abuse of Holy Communion, and the resurrection of the dead.

But sometime after this first letter, things really heated up. The congregation that initially squabbled amongst itself suddenly started targeting the apostle. A whole number of accusations were levelled against him. The two most well-known accusations were that he wasn't a great speaker and that he wasn't spiritual enough. His sermons were boring, they said. He has not charisma and there is now spiritual power in his ministry.

By making these accusations the congregations was obviously implying that if only Paul was a *better* pastor, things would change. They started comparing him with other visiting preachers in Corinth, who seemed better equipped for the ministry.

This looming dispute reached a breaking-point, when (as it seems) the Corinthians demanded a "letter of recommendation" from Paul. They expected Paul to prove that he is both worthy and able to hold this office.

With the flue around, most of you will have visited a doctor in the past weeks. Sometimes when you wait in the waiting room your eyes may catch a number of framed degrees, diplomas and certificates displayed on the wall. They are put up there with a purpose. They are to assure the patient that the doctor that they are visiting is indeed

a well-qualified and competent practitioner.

That is what the Corinthians demanded from Paul. “Come-on, Pastor, show us your certificate, show us your letter of recommendation.”

Is that a fair call? I think we all agree, a pastor needs at least some form of formal education. But do we really measure with the same yardstick used in the commercial world?

The apostle Paul responds to this question by highlighting that the pastor is equipped first and foremost by God.

Being a pastor is totally different from being a CEO of a company. The difference lies in the *nature* of the company.

This is best illustrated by what happened at Mount Sinai. Those of you who were in Church last Sunday will recall the remarkable story of God making a covenant with the people of Israel and sealing this covenant with the ten commandments. But even before Moses gets down from the mountain, holding the two stone tablets in his hands, the Israelites have already violated the covenant. They are worshipping a golden calf.

And that is the history of Israel. Time and time again God renews his covenant, but try as they may the Israelites don't change. Like a magnet they are just drawn away from God all the time.

That is when God decided to make a new covenant. And he says, I will no longer write my law on stone tablets, instead I will write them on the heart of my people. And I will do so by giving them “my Spirit”.

Bottom line is: We cannot change. The natural human heart resists God all the time. For us to change, Jesus said to Nicodemus, we need to be “reborn by the Spirit” (John 3). Something divine needs to happen to us.

Now, it is the task of the pastor to communicate this. But what makes it so difficult is that he communicates something which *humanly speaking is impossible*. Man does not change by himself. Now the pastor can use all kinds of communication skills or even entertainment skills to catch the attention of his audience, and they may even applaud his efforts, but they don't necessarily change.

But that is what the Corinthians demand from Paul. They want to see his credentials, his letter of recommendation. Lets see how good you are. If you had only studied in Alexandria, they intimated, where this charismatic preacher Apollos studied, that would have made a change. If you were only more educated, more passionate, more focussed, more spiritual ... things would be different.

It is not difficult to see, what the Corinthians are demanding from their pastor are better *human qualities and characteristics*. But according to Paul these very qualities do not contribute to the pastor's competency. Why not? Because the change needed for a new life is *humanly impossible*.

So where then lies the pastor's competency? Paul answers: Only in Christ. But how does Christ reach the hearts of the people? Paul says: It is only through the Word of God as it is conveyed by the pastor.

By now we will all hopefully know, the pastor is a very normal human being. He has certain strengths and certain weaknesses. Sometimes he does remarkable things, which make you proud, but then again, he remains and sinner and at times does things that are quite deplorable. But this not prevent God of using him.

And when the pastor preaches and conveys the Word of God, God himself is talking. If the pastor has been in a congregation for a long time and you personally know him well, you may even surmise beforehand what the contents of his next sermon will be. But it does not change the fact, that as he speaks and exercises the office of the ministry given to him by God, God himself addresses his congregation. His words become God's words to me.

Years ago in my previous congregation, I was privileged to have a number of learner pastors, called vicars. Under my supervision that had to do a practical year. One of my duties was to work their sermon through with them. By the time some of them held the sermon, I knew it off by heart. I had worked it through two or three times myself. But it didn't change the fact, and I had to learn it myself, when that vicar preached, God was addressing me.

And maybe we will experience greater change in our hearts, when we come to church or Bible study and say: "God wants to speak to me today. And today, when I hear his voice, I will not harden my heart" (Ps.95:7-8). The Corinthians said: Paul, you are incompetent. Paul responds: Yes, I am from a human perspective incompetent, but my competence comes from God.

A last point: The Corinthians demanded a letter of recommendation. Did it strike you how Paul responded to this? These squabbling Corinthians want a letter of recommendation and Paul says: I don't need such a letter, because *you* are my letter of recommendation.

Isn't that lovely? The congregation is constantly fighting with Paul, who in turn needs to deal with one internal dispute after another. But Paul does not turn the spear around. Instead he says: "You are my letter of recommendation".

Applied: People may ask me one day: Dieter, let us see your letter of recommendation. And I will say: "My letter of recommendation is St Thomas". Some who may have been

here before may respond: "St Thomas!! Are you sure". And I will say: "Yes, St Thomas". Like myself, the people weren't perfect. Sometimes there was tension. Sometimes I caused the tension. But do you know what? Hearts of people were changed in St Thomas.

Bottom line is: We make a grave mistake when we measure the church or measure the office of the ministry with our human orientated yardsticks. It has always been the case: If you look at the church with the eyes of the "letter" or the eyes of the "flesh" you see nothing attractive, nothing that draws you to it. But for those who "believe" they see the power of God in action. And do you know what? God is active here. And I sincerely hope that you will see and experience it. Amen.